WHAT A SCORE!

All these years no one in Kampung Temiang quite noticed Raden Sastro and his 20 children, not until TV3 featured them on *Majallah 3* some time ago. Then they began to be treated like celebrities. MUHARYANI OTHMAN met the family.

HIS name is rather long — Raden Sastro Sudarmo bin Raden Kromo Wijoyo. So is his list of children. He has 20, and if that is not enough, he looks after his grandson as well.

When people stop and stare, wondering how he and his wife, Puan Asiah Abdullah, could produce so many, Pak Sastro or Wak Stro (pronounced straw) as he is known in his neighbourhood, just gives a broad smile.

The couple, who have been married for 40 years, lives with 12 of their children in a double-storey wooden house in Kampung Temiang in Ipoh. Six of their children are married while five are still in school.

"My children are God's gift. We just accept them with gratitude. And though it has not been easy to bring them up, we have been happy," said the proud father, who looks many years younger than his 70 years.

"We didn't believe in family planning and so I took no precautions. So, the children just kept coming," said Puan Asiah, 55.

Bearing so many children does not seem to have taken a toll on her figure nor appearance. She is still quite shapely and looks fit and healthy.

Her daughters said she was quite fashionable during her younger days. "Mother would have her hair permed occasionally and sometimes she would wear dresses and skirts, especially when she had to ride a bicycle," recalled daughter Halijah.

Pak Sastro is a slim, slightly built man with sleek black hair, combed back with grease. He is soft-spoken and amiable. Despite having lived here long, he still speaks with a strong Indonesian accent.

Asked about his *awet muda* (youthful looks), he said with a sheepish grin: "*Oh ... ada rahsianya* (there's a secret to it)." But he was not telling.

According to Puan Asiah, her husband was a strong and macho man in his younger days. "It didn't take him much effort to cut down huge tree trunks and chop them up for firewood. I think there was some special, mystical strength in him."

Pak Sastro was born in Jogjakarta, Indonesia. His father was a village headman. Pak Sastro ran away from school at an early age and years later, as a young man, he joined the revolutionary movement against Dutch rule.

He travelled throughout the Indonesian islands, then to Singapore, Thailand and finally arrived in Penang just before the Japanese Occupation of Malaya.

Then he moved down to Perak where he worked as a court attendant at the Sultan's palace. When he was working at the Istana of the then Raja Di-Hilir, Raja Kamaruzaman ibni Almarhum Sultan Mansor, he met Puan Asiah.

She was the adopted daughter of a consort of the Raja Di-Hilir. He was 30 and she, 15. After their marriage, they lived in Kampung Pasir Puteh.

"Life was difficult when the children started coming one after the other. The gap was only one or two years. I was earning a small income and there were so many mouths to feed. But we never went hungry and the children could go to school," said Pak Sastro.

Twelve of the children were delivered at home by the kampung *bidan* and the rest at hospital. Puan Asiah once had a miscarriage.

"Each time I returned to hospital to have my baby, the doctors and nurses would lecture me on family planning and contraceptives," said Puan Asiah. "But I would tell them I would stop producing when God wanted me to."

"I never gave up hope on bringing up my large family. I had faith that I could overcome all problems. I didn't ask for much from God but only prayed to Him for good health," said Pak Sastro.

"This was because I had to work hard to supplement my small income. I planted tapioca, sugar-cane, bananas and vegetables in the backyard and gathered firewood for the kitchen."

Fortunately, rent for their kampung house was cheap, at only $16. "My husband would only take $15 from his pay and give me the rest. I earned some money by sewing clothes for friends," said Puan Asiah.

☐ Pak Sastro ... "We have been happy."

Some concerned relatives helped out by sending the couple money and materials for clothes.

Rice and flour were bought by the sack. "I used to cook one gantang of rice, four katis of fish and four katis of vegetables each day," said Puan Asiah. "I would get the cheapest fish and vegetables at the market. Now we cook slightly less but the rice is still one gantang."

Their daily washing looks like a dhobi shop.

Having a lot of children has its share of problems. Some neighbours were unkind to the family when the children were young. "Sometimes when things went missing or were stolen in the kampung, my children would be the first to be blamed. We just ignored the accusations, so there were no quarrels with the neighbours" said Puan Asiah.

"At other times when I was walking with my children, neighbours would not greet me or would even close their doors for fear I would visit them and consume their food."

Pak Sastro is also a small-time bomoh who treats minor ailments and removes charms by using traditional remedies and Quranic verses. He said he inherited this power from his ancestors.

"When I returned to Jogjakarta to visit my two sisters in 1980, they were shocked to find me still alive. While there, I looked for old religious scriptures left by my grandparents which they had referred to, to treat patients."

☐ Puan Asiah ... didn't believe in family planning.

Daughter Maria, 33, has 10 children (six girls and four boys) aged between 10 years and eight months. Is she following her mother's footsteps? "It looks like it," she said. "I'm not into family planning. My husband doesn't ask me to, anyway."

"I'm so used to looking after so many brothers and sisters, I don't mind having a large family of my own," she said.

"Though we were poor, we shared our food equally, but sometimes we would fight over pillows and blankets. When we did not have pocket money to school, we would bring home-cooked *kuih*. There were no movies or any form of luxury for us. But we didn't complain for we accepted our simple life.

"But come Hari Raya, we would still get one or two dresses which mother would sew herself. She would stay up until dawn to get our clothes ready.

"Though there were so many of us, the good thing was that our parents treated us equally. We were taught to share and to live harmoniously. We are grateful that they have instilled in us these simple but important values."

Said Puan Asiah, "When my children and grandchildren come home, the sitting room is turned into a cramped sleeping quarters. You have to walk carefully, otherwise you might trip on one of the children."

Maria has a twin sister, Mariam. The eldest, Nursinah, was given away for adoption to a family friend when she was young.

The other children are Sahir, 34, Suroto, 31, Halijah, 30, Muliono, 29, Sukian, 28, Hatipah, 27, Rubiah, 25, Salwa, 24, Zaiton, 22, Adnan, 21, Azman, 20, Roslan, 18, Rosminah, 17, Robaah, 16, Intan Suriani, 15, Rosnawati, 14, and Redzuan, 12. There are 37 grandchildren.

Jumairi, or Jojo as he is called by the family, is Puan Maria's eldest son and was brought up by Pak Sastro since birth.

Even though some of their children are earning their own living and give them money each month, Pak Sastro and his wife choose not to be idle. They sell sugar-cane juice and *kuih* with the help of the other children.

Initially, some of the neighbours in Kampung Temiang were not aware that the couple had so many children until TV3 news featured them on one of their magazine programmes. They have since been like celebrities.

People started giving them amused or funny looks, but they're not complaining as they're proud to be one big, happy family.

To the elderly couple, love, understanding and sharing are what it takes to maintain harmony and closeness in their large family.